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The Presidential Election Show In Iran

in World — by Akbar E Torbat — May 9, 2017



The Islamic Republic of Iran has started propagandas for its 12th presidential election which is on Friday May 19. This is not a free election because the major secular political parties are banned and prevented to designate their candidates. Islamic Republic is a misnomer, the regime is neither Islamic nor a republic. It is a theocratic totalitarian regime ruled by a clique of Islamic clerics. The candidates for president have to be Muslim male and believe in Shia Twelve imams, no minimum age or formal education is required. The Guardian Council even ruled recently that non-Muslims cannot become candidates in the elections of the cities and villages councils that are simultaneously conducted.^[1]

Clerical Control of the Elections

The presidential applicants in Iran are vetted by the Guardian Council, a 12 men body, six of them are mullahs and six Islamic jurists. The Council ensures the candidates believe in the Islamic ideology in line with the clerical leadership. On April 20, 2017, the Council released the names of the candidates it had selected. From about 1600 applicants registered, only six were selected from those within the regime to run for president. These were the incumbent Hassan Rouhani and five other candidates: Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, Mostafa Hashemitaba, Eshagh Jahangiri, Mostafa Mirsalim, and Ebrahim Raisi. Even though these candidates have affiliated parties, their parties are either clerical or only names on the paper with no significant membership body.

The Guardian Council disqualified the former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his former deputy Hamid Baghaei. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had previously advised Ahmadinejad not to participate. However, he defied the Leader's advice and registered to run saying his purpose was to promote Baghaei. After disqualifications, Ahmadinejad and Baghaei jointly announced they would not endorse any of the selected candidates in the elections. Ahmadinejad has grassroots support among the impoverished Iranians because of his past policies in favor of the poor. In the past, Ahmadinejad and his colleagues had tried to marginalize the role of clerics in the state affairs, but

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the clerics stopped them from doing so. In 2013, Ahmadinejad tried to promote his Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim-Masha'ei as his successor, but the Guardian Council disqualified Rahim-Masha'ei. Despite lack of people's support, the top clerics in Tehran are desperate to maintain power. Khamenei wants to hold all state powers in the hands of Mullahs. He is promoting Ebrahim Raisi to become his successor.

Raisi is a cleric and currently serves as the chief custodian of Astan Quds Razavi, an Islamic charitable foundation that manages the Imam Reza shrine in the city of Mashhad. The foundation is the wealthiest Islamic endowment organization in Iran and pays no taxes. For that reason, Raisi has strong financial backing even though his past record is not clear. In 1988, he was involved in mass executions of more than 3000 leftist political prisoners who opposed the clerical establishments. Raisi along with Mostafa Pourmohammadi, Rouhani's Minister of Justice, were two of the four members committee that put the prisoners to death. Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf is currently the Mayor of Tehran. In 2013 election, he became the next runner up after Hassan Rouhani. Jahangiri is the first vice president of Rouhani. The other two candidates are not well-known to the Iranian public although they have had some high-level positions in the regime.

The Political groups in Iran are divided to three camps. 1) The conservative Islamists (principleists) who support the existing clerical regime led by Khamenei. 2) Islamists who want to preserve the clerical regime but reform it to be tolerable to some Iranians. 3) Political groups who want to topple the theocratic regime and establish a secular democratic government. Most of the secular groups, including six Kurdish parties have boycotted the elections. They believe no one with logical mind should vote in this election.

The Election Showdown

This election is a showdown between Khamenei's backed candidates and the incumbent Hassan Rouhani. Rouhani, his vice president Jahangiri, and Hashemitaba are backed by some reformist's factions while the other candidates are supported by the conservative Islamist groups. Because of the clerics' domination over the Islamic charities and the state enterprising, large number of Iranians are dependent to them for employment. Rouhani does not have significant political base, and his main supporters are the compradors who have benefited from his neoliberal economic policies. Jahangiri is standing in the election to defend Rouhani during the TV debates and will probably withdraw in his favor. Rouhani had relied on backing of the former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani since he became presidential candidate in 2013. However Rafsanjani died mysteriously on January 8 this year.^[ii]

The elections' campaigns are limited to 3 weeks. There are three rounds of debates between the candidates. Unlike the previous two elections, this year's presidential debates were not initially planned to be broadcast live. However due to public criticisms, the debates were shown live on the state television but there were no audience at the scene to observe them. The first debate was on April 28, and intended to be about the social issues but it turned out to be more about economic issues. During the debate, Rouhani came under barrage of attacks by Ghalibaf because of failing to deliver his promises. Rouhani's anti-labor policies has angered the labor class and it may cause him a defeat at the poles.^[iii] Ghalibaf has advocated pro-poor policies to attract Ahmadinejad's supporters. However, on May 3 Ahmadinejad reiterated that he would not support any of the candidates.

The second debate on May 5 was about domestic and foreign policies. Both Rouhani and Jahangiri came under attack by the conservative candidates. Embarrassingly, Jahangiri answered the main question put to him by reading from a prepared text. Ghalibaf attacked Jahangiri for caring only about the top wealthy 4% and not having any concern about the remaining 96% of the population. Mirsalim said Jahangiri merely gives slogans and proposes no policy for promoting Iran's power and prosperity. The nuclear agreement and Rouhani's failure for letting the continuation of the US sanctions against Iran were also discussed in the debates. Despite that Iran has fulfilled its obligations under the nuclear agreement, the economic prosperity that Rouhani had promised has not happened and people are suffering. All competing candidates said they would adhere to the nuclear deal that Iran had agreed on. Rouhani and Jahangiri were further attacked based on accusations against the education minister's daughter for smuggling clothes into Iran. Rouhani and Jahangiri could not provide convincing responses to many criticisms. The third debate is going to be on May 12.

The outcome of this election is important for the West. The US and EU had backed Rouhani to conclude the nuclear deal. Since the nuclear deal was implemented in February 2016, the political leaderships in the US, Britain and France have changed. President Donald Trump has taken a tougher role in dealing with the regime. Also, the US Congress has prepared legislations for



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imposing additional sanctions against Iran. However, the approval of those legislations has been postponed to increase Rouhani's chance to go to his second term. Despite the US threat to scrap the nuclear deal, the European Union has strongly supported it. Since the implementation of the deal, the EU member countries have established lucrative commercial relations with Iran. Some Iranian political factions had opposed the deal for the reason that it opens the country to foreign powers domination.

Since the radio and television broadcasts in Iran are under control of the government, social media groups and the Persian language television programs from abroad, especially the Persian BBC and the Voice of America play effective roles in the Iranian elections. Khamenei has warned the foreign countries not to meddle in Iran's presidential elections. Also, Iran's judiciary has blocked Instagram Live and the voice messaging feature from Telegram ahead of the presidential elections. These social media are widely used to spread information in favor of the reformist candidates and against their competitors. Shockingly, on April 29, the chairman of the Persian language GEM TV, Saeed Karimian along with his business partner were assassinated in Istanbul, Turkey. The regime had previously accused Karimian of acting against nation security.[iv]

Iran's Economic Doldrums

Rouhani's neoliberal policies have been disastrous for the Iranian economy. Several of Iran's important manufacturing companies that had been established under the Shah along with many other industrial plants recently went bankrupt and were closed. That has led to massive job-loss in the country and the unemployment rate has exceeded 30%. There are no productive jobs available in the industries. In Tehran, large number of peddlers, including many children called "Koodakan Kar" are walking in the streets begging to sell small things for cash. In Mashhad some prostitution houses called "Khanehaye Efaf" have been established for temporary marriage agreement (sigheh). Many men from Arab countries come to visit Mashhad and meet underage girls for temporary marriage arbitrated by the mullahs.[v]

The economic promises that Rouhani had given have not materialized. He often fabricates economic statistics and blames his predecessor's policies instead of his own for Iran's economic deterioration. Under Rouhani, the nation's money supply has increased by about 30% as compared to 10% increase during his predecessor's term. Since the velocity of money is currently very slow and there is not sufficient investment in the industries, and due to financial corruption within the government, economic deterioration has accelerated. Rouhani has somewhat reduced inflation rate at the expense of putting the Iranian economy into recession. At the same time imported products have flooded the Iranian market bankrupting Iran's basic industries.

Raisi who is the favored candidate by the Leader Khamenei has had no major role in the government previously and his records of being a judge involved in executions of thousands of political prisoners are very disturbing to Iranians. Khamenei's replacement of one cleric by another cannot revive the Iranian economy.

Under the clerical leadership, Iranians have suffered too long. The secular Iranian political groups are now asking the voters to boycott the elections and demand ousting of the clerical regime. They believe participation in this election will legitimize this theocratic regime that is ready to implode.

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[i] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/19/irans-guardian-council-tries-exclude-non-muslims-running>

[ii] <http://www.countercurrents.org/2017/01/19/the-legacy-of-irans-powerful-cleric-akbar-hashemi-rafsanjani/>

[iii] <http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/10043/Protesting-their-dreadful-conditions-workers-interrupt-Rouhani-s-speech>

[iv] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/30/iranian-gem-tv-saeed-karimian-shot-dead-in-istanbul-turkish-media-reports>

[v] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/07/prayer-food-sex-and-water-parks-in-irans-holy-city-of-mashhad>.

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K SHESHU BABU

May 9, 2017 at 6:00 pm

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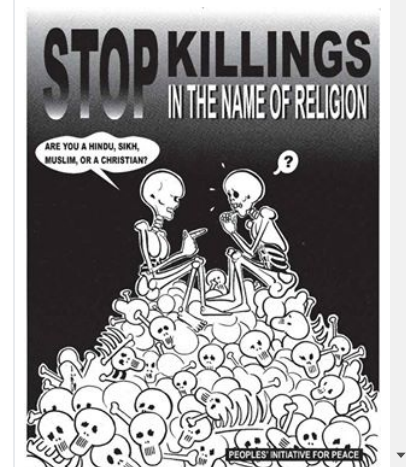
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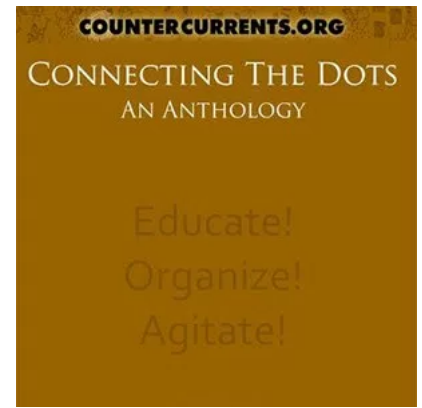
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